

Preface

Sri Ramakrishna says that there can be as many spiritual paths as there are spiritual aspirants. Extending this further, we can accept as its corollary that there can be as many gods as there are devotees. As long as the central fact, viz., that these gods are the doorways leading to the one Godhead, is not forgotten, polytheism, pantheism, henotheism or 'any-theism' is acceptable. The bewildering variety of the Hindu gods should be viewed from this angle.

An unbiased, if not reverent, study of the Hindu gods and goddesses can convince anyone of the rich symbology they represent. Contemplating on them with a proper understanding of their symbolical significance will help us to be raised to more profound levels of spiritual experience.

In this booklet a humble attempt has been made to unravel the symbolism of Mahāviṣṇu and his various forms. We earnestly hope that it will provide the readers with a basic knowledge of these deities and rouse their curiosity to know about the other deities of the Hindu pantheon also.

Readers who may be interested in a more comprehensive study of the deities of the Hindu pantheon are advised to go through my book, *Hindu Gods and Goddesses*, published by the Sri Rama-krishna Math, Chennai.

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MAHĀVIṢṆU AND HIS VARIOUS FORMS VIṢṆU

Viṣṇu, also known as Mahāviṣṇu, is the second deity of the Hindu Trinity. He represents sattvaguṇa and is the centripetal force as it were, responsible for sustenance, protection and maintenance of the created universe.

Etymologically speaking, the word 'Viṣṇu' means 'one who pervades,' 'one who has entered into everything'. So he is the transcendent as well as the immanent reality of the universe. He is the inner cause and power by which things exist.

Another name of Viṣṇu which is extremely common and popular is Nārāyaṇa. The word means:

- 'One who has made the causal waters his abode;'
- 'One who is the abode of all human beings;'
- 'One who has made the hearts of human beings his abode;'
- 'One who is the final goal of all human beings.'

The first interpretation has given rise to a description of Nārāyaṇa which is common and popular, as follows:

After the destruction of the universe of the previous cycle and before the creation of the next, Nārāyaṇa, the Supreme God, falls asleep on his bed of the great serpent Śeṣa (also called Ananta), which is floating on the waters of the ocean kṣīrasamudra ('ocean of milk'). One of his legs is resting on the lap of his consort Lakṣmi, who is gently pressing it. When he is dreaming as it were, of the next creation, a lotus springs forth from his navel along with god Brahmā seated on it. After waking up, he instructs Brahmā to proceed with the act of creation.

This is a highly allegorical picture. The ocean represents the causal waters from which all life springs up, a concept not uncommonly found in other religions also. Or, since it is kṣīrasamudra, the ocean of milk, it stands for the purest form of prakṛti or nature in its undifferentiated state, whiteness indicating this purity.

Out of the several equivalents of the word āpas (= water), is the word amṛta (nectar, signifying bliss also). Hence we can say that the Lord Nārāyaṇa is floating on the ocean of bliss, which is as it should be.

The serpent Śeṣa or Ananta is said to have a thousand heads and is supporting the worlds on its hoods. Ananta, which literally means the 'endless' or 'infinite,' actually stands for cosmic time which is infinite or endless. Created worlds come into being in time and are sustained in time. This is the meaning of the thousand hoods supporting the worlds. The thousand hoods, simply indicate the innumerable divisions of time.

The concept of the thousand hoods supporting the worlds can also lead to the interpretation that the serpent represents the cosmic space, in which everything exists.

The word Śeṣa is also significant. It actually means 'the remainder,' 'what is left over at the end'. Since creation cannot proceed out of nothing, it is to be assumed that 'something' is 'left over' (śeṣa) from the previous creation, which forms the seed as it were for the next. So, Śeṣa represents the totality of the jīvas or the individual souls in their subtle form, left over from the previous cycle and needing more opportunities for liberation.

Serpent can also represent kāma or desire which is always left over (śeṣa), even after the acquisition and enjoyment of the desired object. This goes on until mokṣa or final liberation. Hence, in a cosmic sense, it can stand for the desire of the Lord to proceed with the next cycle of creation after rest!

Viṣṇu is always described as nīlamegha-śyāma, of a dark blue hue like that of the rain-bearing cloud. Since the infinite empty space appears as deep blue in colour, it is but proper that Viṣṇu, the all-pervading cosmic power, be depicted as blue in colour.

The commonest form of the Viṣṇu icons has one face, four arms holding śaṅkha (conch), cakṛa (discus), gadā (mace), padma (lotus) and wears a necklace with the famous gem Kaustubha dangling on the mole called Śrīvatsa, on the left chest. He is also wearing a garland (of gems, or fragrant flowers) Vaijayantī by name.

The four arms represent the four quarters, hence, the absolute power of the Lord in all directions. The śaṅkha represents the five elements like the earth, water etc., cakṛa stands for the cosmic mind, gadā indicates the cosmic intellect and the padma points to the evolving world. Just as the lotus is born out of water and unfolds gradually in all its glory, this world also is born out of the causal waters and evolves gradually in all its splendour. Hence the lotus stands for the evolved world. This world can be created only by a combination of the five elements, the mind and the intellect. Hence the total meaning of this symbology would be that the Lord Viṣṇu is the creator and master of this world.

The mole Śrīvatsa, represents all objects of enjoyment, the products of nature. The gem Kaustubha, resting on it, stands for the enjoyer. So, this world of duality consisting of the

enjoyer and the enjoyed, is like an ornament for the Lord. The garland Vaijayantī is symbolical of the subtle elements (bhūta-tanmātras).

Sometimes two more weapons, Nandaka, the sword (representing wisdom) and Śārṅga, the bow (representing the cosmic senses) are added to the arsenal of Lord Viṣṇu.

AVATĀRAS OR INCARNATIONS OF LORD VIṢṆU

To ward off the extraordinary perils to which mankind is prone-may be the visitations from the demons, may be from the human malefactors-and to preserve the socio-ethical order, Lord Viṣṇu, whose duty it is to preserve this world, often incarnates himself. Though such incarnations are popularly considered to be ten, there is no limit to their number. Nor are there any restrictions regarding the time and place of their appearance. Whenever dharma declines and adharma prospers, he bodies himself forth to restore the balance in the world.

A brief account of the ten avatāras, popularly known as the Daśāvatāras, may now be given:

MATSYA

In the Matsyāvatāra (Fish incarnation), the Lord is said to have saved Manu (the progenitor of mankind) and the Saptarṣīs (the seven sages, mind-born sons of Brahmā) along with their wives during the deluge. The world was repopulated through them later on.

KŪRMA

Lord Viṣṇu incarnated himself as the Kūrma (the Tortoise) in order to support the mount Mandara which started sinking during the churning of the ocean (samudramathana). The gods and the demons had jointly undertaken this adventure to get amṛta (nectar) from the ocean.

VARĀHA

Next in the series is the Varāhāvatāra (Boar-incarnation) in which the Lord killed the demon Hiraṇyākṣa and lifted the earth out of the flood waters in which it had been submerged. This may be symbolic representation of the extrication of the world from the deluge of sin by the power of the Supreme Being.

NARASIṂHA

When Prahlāda, the great devotee of Viṣṇu was being severely tortured by his father, the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu, (who was a non-believer in the existence of an omnipresent and omnipotent God), Narasiṁha (Man-lion) appeared, emerging out of the pillar shown by him and killed him. Being a combination of man (the best of higher creatures) and lion (the best of lower creatures) Narasiṁha represents the best of creation. Incidentally this also proves the omnipresence of God. Narasiṁha is especially the embodiment of valour which is a divine attribute and hence worshipped by rulers and warriors. His mantra is said to be very powerful,

capable of destroying enemies and exorcising evil.

The next six incarnations are in the human form.

VĀMANA

When Bali the grandson of Prahlāda conquered the three worlds, Indra was deprived of his heavenly kingdom. At the request of Aditi, the mother of Indra, Lord Viṣṇu incarnated as Vāmana (the Dwarf), a young brāhmaṇa boy, and approached Bali who was known for his munificence, for a gift of land that could be covered by three steps. With the first and the second he covered the earth and heaven, and with the third, he pushed down Bali to the netherworld. Hence he is also known as Trivikrama, one who encompassed the world with three big steps.

This myth teaches us that since even God had to resort to the dwarf's form while begging, one who begs makes himself small! Secondly a true brāhmaṇa can conquer the three worlds by the power of the spirit. These five avatāras have been referred to in the various sections of the Vedas.

PARAŚURĀMA

Paraśurāma (Rāma with the battle-axe) is the sixth avatāra. Born as the son of the sage-couple, Jamadagni and Reṇukā, he exterminated the tyrannical among the kṣattriyas led by Kārtavīrya, who were oppressing the people. Whether this story has any historical basis and represents the struggle for supremacy between the brāhmaṇas and the kṣattriyas, it is difficult to say.

Śrī Rāma, the next incarnation, met Paraśurāma and absorbed his power into himself. Hence the latter is sometimes considered as 'āveśāvatāra,' an incarnation by the temporary possession of Viṣṇu's powers.

ŚRĪ RĀMA

Śrī Rāma, one of the two most popular incarnations of the Lord Viṣṇu, comes next in the series. His story is too well-known to need any repetition. He typifies the ideal man. His story, the *Rāmāyaṇa* has now become an immortal epic. His name is known as the *tāraka-mantra*, the mantra that takes one across the ocean of transmigration.

BALARĀMA

Balarāma, Rāma the strong, the elder brother of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, is the eighth incarnation. His many adventures include the slaying of the ape Dvivida and the demon Dhenuka, shaking the ramparts of Hastināvatī (the capital city of the Pāṇḍavas) and dragging the river Yamunā out of its course. The story that the serpent Śeṣa issued forth from his mouth at the time of his death gives credence to the belief that he was the incarnation of Śeṣa. Some scholars, basing their

conjecture on the weapon of Balarāma (the hala or plough), opine that he was an agricultural hero raised to the status of an avatāra in course of time.

ŚRĪ KṚṢṆA

Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the ninth incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu is, perhaps, the most popular, so much so, that he is considered Pūrṇavatāra (the incarnation *in toto*) and all other deities are regarded as his manifestations. His story and his exploits are too numerous and too wellknown to be mentioned here. To the average Hindu, he is the supreme statesman, warrior, hero, philosopher and teacher, nay, God Himself. He is the great expounder of the 'Song Celestial,' the *Bhagavadgītā*.

KALKI

The tenth avatāra, Kalki, is yet to come. He will descend upon the earth at the end of the present age (Kaliyuga). Riding on the back of a white horse, with a drawn sword, he will destroy the enemies of dharma and re-establish it in all its glory.

MORE ABOUT THE AVATĀRAS

This list of the ten avatāras of Viṣṇu is by no means the standard one accepted by all. Taking Śrī Kṛṣṇa as Viṣṇu Himself, he is not included in some lists. His place is taken over by Buddha. In some other lists, Buddha replaces Balarāma. Icono-graphically speaking, Buddha seems to have disappeared from such lists only after the 15th century.

Strangely enough, the purpose of Buddha-incarnation was to mislead men of low birth and genius who had become too proficient in the sacred lore and were a threat to the supremacy of the gods! This looks more like a joke than a serious proposition. It is obvious that the Hindus sealed the fate of Buddhism in this country by absorbing Buddha into the pantheon of the avatāras.

Haṁsa, Sātvata, Yajña, Dattātreya and Vedavyāsa are some of the avatāras included in other lists, keeping the total as ten only. The number, however, rises sometimes to as high as twentythree.

CATURVYŪHAS

The Bhāgavata or the Pāñcarātra religion, which preaches the cult of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa-Kṛṣṇa, puts forth the theory that Lord Viṣṇu has four aspects of manifestation: a. the Para or the supreme; b. the Vyūha or the emanation; c. the Vibhava or the incarnation and d. the Arca or the icon.

Para is the Supreme as He is in all His glory. Vibhava represents the incarnations already dealt with. Arca is the descent of the Lord into the icon ceremonially installed and worshipped in the temples.

The Vyūhas or the emanations are four in number. Hence the term 'caturvyūhas,' also called 'caturmūrtis'. They are: Vāsudeva, Saṅkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. According to Vaiṣṇava mytho-logies, while Śrī Kṛṣṇa is Vāsudeva, his brother Balarāma is Saṅkarṣaṇa. Pradyumna and Aniruddha are Kṛṣṇa's son and grandson respectively. Historically speaking, it is possible that these Yādava heroes were, in course of time, apotheosised into these Vyūhas. Symbolically, Vāsu-deva represents citta (mind-stuff), whereas Saṅkarṣaṇa stands for ahaṅkāra (egoity), Pradyumna for buddhi (intellect) and Aniruddha for manas (mind). They represent the cosmic psychological evolution.

Later on, these Vyūhas were increased to as many as twenty-four. Iconographically, all these Vyūhas are identical in appearance except for the arrangement of the four emblems-śaṅkha (conch), cakṛa (discus), gadā (mace) and padma (lotus).

The Pāñcarātra theology often adds another aspect of the manifestations, viz., the Antaryāmin (the indweller), which obviously, cannot be represented through icons.

MINOR INCARNATIONS

Hindu mythology abounds in stories of Viṣṇu's avatāras, which may be pūrṇāvatāras (full manifestations) like Śrī Kṛṣṇa, aṁśāvatāras (partial manifestations) like Kapila or āveśāvatāras (temporary infilling of the divine power) like Paraśurāma. A few of these may now be dealt with.

DATTĀTREYA

He was the son of the great sage Atri and his wife Anasūyā, one of the paragons of chastity in Hindu mythology. He was the originator of certain magical rites and the creator of the soma plant. He was a teacher of the non-Āryan people. Association with people of low birth and objects of pleasure, has made him ritually impure. But, learning and enlightenment have made him so pure that nothing can ever stain him. Being the incarnation of the Trinity, he is shown as having three heads, four hands and accompanied by four dogs of different colours which represent the four Vedas.

The Dattātreya concept may be an attempt at harmonising the three cults of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. It may also have been the medium through which non-Vedic cults were brought into the fold of Vedic Hinduism.

DHANVANTARI

Dhanvantari rose from the ocean, at the time of churning, holding the amṛta-kalāśa (pot of ambrosia) in his hand. He is the originator of medical sciences. Reborn as the king of Kāśī he brought medical science to the earth.

Vedas also mention a Dhanvantari, a god associated with herbs and medicines.

He is described as a handsome person holding the pot of ambrosia and seated in front of Viṣṇu's insignias.

HAYAGRĪVA OR HAYAŚĪRṢA

Yājñavalkya, the great sage, lost the Yajurveda as a result of his guru's curse and performed severe penance. Sun-god, pleased by his penance, appeared before him as a deity with the horse's head and taught him the same Veda in another form. This section has come to be known as the *Vājasaneyī Samhitā* (vāji = horse). The origins of the Hayagrīva avatāra (the deity with the horse's head) are perhaps found here.

Two demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha had stolen the Vedas and hidden them under water. Viṣṇu took the form of Hayagrīva, dived into the bottom of the ocean and rescued them after killing the demons.

Hayagrīva is the god of learning, akin to the goddess Sarasvatī.

He is shown in the human form, with the horse's head, possessing four or eight arms, carrying the various weapons and emblems of Viṣṇu.

KAPILA

Kapila, the son of Kardama and Devahūtī was a great sage who reduced to ashes, the sixty thousand sons of the king Sagara, just by a glance. Probably this story is at the back of his being identified sometimes with Agni. He taught Sāṅkhya philosophy to his mother.

Icons of Kapila usually have the hair dressed up as a crown (jaṭā-mukuta), a beard, four arms, two of which are in yoga holding a pitcher and the other two holding śaṅkha and cakra.

MOHINĪ

At the behest of the gods who had been deprived of the ambrosia by the demons during the churning of the ocean, Viṣṇu appeared as Mohinī, the enchantress, who successfully duped the demons and distributed the nectar among the gods. Even Śiva is said to have been bewitched by her beauty.

The story teaches us that immortality (amṛtatva) can be gained only by the conquest of delusion (moha).

Mohinī is shown as a beautiful young woman wearing colourful garments, decorated with ornaments and carrying a vase of nectar in hand.

NARA-NĀRĀYANA

After the purpose of Narasimha-avatāra was accomplished, Narasimha split himself into two, the lion part becoming the sage Nārāyaṇa and the human part the sage Nara. Nara and Nārāyaṇa then retired to Badarikāśrama for performing austerities. When Indra tried to seduce them through celestial nymphs, Nārāyaṇa produced the nymph Ūrvaśī from his thigh (ūru = thigh) who was more beautiful than all of them put together.

According to another version, these sages were sons of Dharma and Ahimsā. They performed severe austerities and successfully vanquished the demon Sahasrakavaca (one who has a thousand armours).

These sages were reborn later as Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna.

This story has an important lesson for us. Everyone of us is a mixture of the human and the divine elements. The anti-human and the anti-divine demon is ever attempting to seduce us with his thousand wiles. To successfully vanquish him, we need to perform tapas or austerity.

Nara-Nārāyaṇa is represented either as a single person or as two persons. In the former case the icon may have two or four arms carrying the japamālā (rosary) or the usual emblems of Viṣṇu. In the latter case, Nara may be shown as having two heads and two arms and wearing the deer skin. Nārāyaṇa is depicted with the usual four arms carrying the emblems śaṅkha, cakra, padma and japamālā.

VYĀSA

Vyāsa is a cosmic entity born in every age to propagate the scriptures.

Kṛṣṇa-Dvaipāyana, the son of Parāśara, is the well-known Vyāsa of this age. He got that name since he collected all the extant Vedic hymns and divided them (vyas = to divide) into the four Vedas. He is the author of the great epic *Mahābhārata* as also all the purāṇas (mythologies) and the *Brahmasūtras*.

In images, he is shown as of slender build, dark in complexion and with the hair dressed up as a crown. His four disciples Paila, Vaiśampāyana, Jaimini and Sumantu are also shown by his side.

YAJÑA

Viṣṇu has been identified with yajña or sacrifice in early Vedic literature. The *Bhāgavata* calls Varāhāvatāra as Yajña-varāha and identifies his limbs with the various parts of a sacrifice. In other mythological lores, he, as Yajñeśa, is described as the son of Ruci and Ākūti. The entire universe which is in a constant state of flux is like a sacrifice and the Lord responsible for this creation is looked upon as the personification of that sacrifice. Hence he is Yajña or Yajñeśvara.

His image has two heads, seven hands, three legs and four horns. The hands carry the sacrificial implements like ājyapātra (vessel holding the ghee), sruka, sruva and juhū (various kinds of spoons and ladles), apart from śaṅkha and cakra.

Obviously this is a symbolical representation, the various limbs representing the various items of the sacrifice. The description is rather too technical to be dealt with in a small book like this.

OTHER ASPECTS OF VIṢṆU COMMONLY WORSHIPPED

Jagannātha of Pūri in Orissā is a Vaiṣṇava deity which draws huge crowds, especially during the annual car festival. The image appears rather grotesque and is shaped out of a log and has prominent eyes. Once in twelve years or so, the image is renewed, the log being brought every-time mysteriously. The insertion of some ancient relic into the new image sanctifies it. It represents Śrī Kṛṣṇa with similar images representing Balarāma and Subhadrā (Kṛṣṇa's sister).

Pāṇḍuraṅga-viṭṭhala commonly known as Viṭṭhala or Viṭhoba is the deity of the famous Viṣṇu temple at Paṇḍharpur in Mahārāṣṭra. In fact, the word 'Viṭṭha' is a corrupted form of the word Viṣṇu. Rakumābāī (Rukmiṇī) is his consort standing by his left side.

This is the form of Viṣṇu revealed to a brāhmaṇa, Puṇḍali by name, because of his intense devotion to his parents.

Raṅganātha, along with Varadarāja of Kāñcīpuram and Venkaṭeśa of Tirupati, is the most popular aspect of Viṣṇu worshipped in South India. The well-known temple at Śrīraṅgam in Tamilnāḍu is the very heart of the Śrīvaiṣṇava cult. This temple-at least the original icon-is said to have been born out of the ocean and given by Śrī Rāma to Vibhīṣaṇa. While carrying it from Ayodhyā to Laṅkā, Vibhīṣaṇa placed it on the ground at the present site, in order to rest a while. Unfortunately for him (and fortunately for others!) it got firmly fixed there!

The image is of the Yogaśayana type (lying on the serpent-bed in yoga) with only two hands, the right hand apparently supporting the head while the left rests on the serpent-bed.

The lotus with Brahmā, the Āyudha-puruṣas (the weapons in human form), the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha who were killed by him, as also some sages like Bhṛgu and Mārkaṇḍeya are often depicted along with the Lord.

Similar yogaśayana images are found in Śrīraṅgaṇa of Karnāṭaka and Trivandrum of Kerala where it is known as Padmanābha or Anantaśayana.

Varadarāja, the king among the bestowers of boons, is another aspect of Viṣṇu which is very popular. Also known as Karivarada, it represents that aspect of the Lord responsible for saving Gajendra, the elephant king, from the death-clutches of the crocodile.

He is shown as riding on his vehicle Garuḍa and in the act of discharging the discus. The elephant Gajendra with its foot caught by the powerful teeth of the crocodile is also shown. Sometimes a human figure with its hands in obeisance is also shown near the crocodile, to represent the gandharva (a demigod) who had been delivered from his curse which had resulted in his birth as a crocodile.

The temple of Śrī Varadarāja at Kāñcīpuram in South India is one of the most important and famous Viṣṇu temples.

Veṅkaṭeśa, also known as *Veṅkaṭeśvara*, Śrīnivāsa or Bālājī of Tirupati in Āndhra Pradesh is perhaps the most popular of all the Hindu deities in our country and the temple on the Tirupati hill gets fabulous income. The word *Veṅgaḍam* of Tamiḻ origin signifies a hill. So *Veṅkaṭeśa* is the Lord of the hill. The story goes that Viṣṇu as *Varāha* (the boar) decided to continue his stay on the earth and that *Garuḍa* brought down the hill of *Vaikuṇṭha* to the earth for the Lord's residence. Śrīnivāsa or *Veṅkaṭeśa*, another aspect of Viṣṇu, also manifested himself there at that time to reside on the earth for the good of mankind.

The image is said to be an *udbhavamūrti* (spontaneously manifested) and does not conform to known āgama traditions. As regards the exact nature and form of the image, doubts exist, some opining that it represents *Harihara*, and others considering it as *Subrahmaṇya* or even *Devī*.

Viṣṇvaksena or 'the all-conquering' is an aspect of Viṣṇu, which occupies the same place in the Vaiṣṇava tradition as *Gaṇeśa* in the Śaiva tradition. He is worshipped at the beginning of any under-taking, to avoid obstacles. He is shown with four hands, wearing *śaṅkha*, *cakra* and *gadā* in three hands and the fourth exhibiting the *tarjanīmudrā* (threatening finger pose). The right leg is usually hanging down from the pedestal.

Viṣṇvaksena is also depicted sometimes as the gate-keeper or chief attendant of Viṣṇu. He is shown standing on a white lotus and with long matted hair as also a beard. He represents the worldly sciences.

MINOR DEITIES ASSOCIATED WITH VIṢṆU

Garutmān or *Garuḍa*, the mighty bird-vehicle of Viṣṇu is a minor deity invariably found in all the Vaiṣṇava temples. He is described as the son of the sage couple *Kaśyapa* and *Vinatā* and as the younger brother of *Aruṇa*, the charioteer of *Sun-god*. The chief among his multifarious exploits is his bringing the pot of nectar from *Indra's* heaven. It is precisely this that made Viṣṇu choose him as his mount.

Literally the word *Garuḍa* means 'wings of speech.' He actually personifies Vedic knowledge. On his wings, as it were, Vedic knowledge has come down to us, from the world of God.

The *Garuḍa* image is usually anthro-pomorphic. He is shown with a sharp beak, and two wings at the back. The hands may be eight or four or just two. Two of the hands are always in the adoration pose. In the others, he carries the conch, wheel, mace, sword, snake and nectar-pot. The image is usually installed right opposite the central shrine.

It may appear to be rather intriguing that Viṣṇu has a serpent as his couch and an eagle, its arch enemy, as his mount! This is to show that he is the Lord of balance and harmony which is an essential quality for one charged with the responsibility of sustaining this multifarious

universe.

Another deity invariably found in the Viṣṇu temples, especially in the South, is Hanumān, the monkey-god. The *Rāmāyaṇa* pictures him as a highly erudite, cultured and refined person. He is as strong as he is wise, and as devoted as he is strong and wise, a rare combination indeed.

He is represented in two postures: When in the company of Śrī Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, he is shown standing humbly at a distance or sitting devotedly at the feet of Śrī Rāma. In shrines specially erected for him, he strikes a heroic pose, usually with the mace in his left hand and carrying the Sañjīvanī mountain in his right hand.

Apart from these, it is common to show the weapons of Viṣṇu also in human form. They are then called Āyudhapuruṣas (weapon-beings). The Āyudhapuruṣa may be male, female, or neuter, depending upon the gender of the word indicating it. For instance, Gadā (mace) is a female deity whereas the Cakra (discus) is a neuter deity.

The Sudarśana-cakra is shown as a person with a hexagon as his background, brilliant as fire and having four or eight or sixteen arms holding bow, arrow, trident, noose, goad and other implements as also weapons, apart from the usual Vaiṣṇavite symbols. It is said to represent the cosmic mind, the will of the Lord to multiply as well as His infinite power to create and destroy the universe. The *Sudarśana-mantra* is said to possess the power to neutralise poisons and exorcise malignant spirits.

The Kaumodakī, the gadā (mace) of Viṣṇu is depicted as a female deity, with one face and two hands which are in the posture of adoration. It symbolises power and sovereignty.

No account of Viṣṇu will be complete without mentioning the śālagrāma, a blackish rounded and polished stone with a hole containing the fossils of tiny molluscs, which is worshipped as an emblem of his. There are several varieties of them representing different aspects of the Lord. Śālagrāmas can be installed in temples but are usually worshipped in one's own home privately. Once it is kept at home, its worship becomes obligatory.